

The Descendants

Review by Tom Sims, Executive Director, Cape May Film Festival

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REVIEW AT A GLANCE

MUST SEE: If you've loved every relationship movie or George Clooney movie you've ever seen.

CATCH IT WHEN YOU CAN: If you're looking for very good film that never dips below acceptable drama but never rises to masterpiece status as well.

SKIP IT: If you don't like Clooney or quality relationship films (oh, and you're in a minority if you don't like Clooney).

George Clooney is not infallible. The Oscar winner regarded by many as Hollywood's leading man has not always picked the best projects. Last year, his one film, *The American*, was mediocre at best. Maybe 2009 was Clooney's best year with *The Fantastic Mr. Fox* and one of my favorites *Up in the Air*.

This year, his film offerings are *The Ides of March*, which was more political cliché than political thriller and his latest offering *The Descendants*, from Alexander Payne, the director who gave us Oscar-winner *Sideways* (2004). Payne has had a successful yet somewhat overlooked body of work that includes great films as *Sideways*, very good films like *About Schmidt* (2002) with Jack Nicolson, and admittedly some not-so-great films like *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* (2007), where he probably like to forget he was the screenwriter. My favorite Payne film is one you likely haven't seen. In a 2006 compilation of short films entitled *Paris, Je T'aime*, his film *14e Arrondissement* was truly one of my favorites (special thanks to Terri A. for pointing out this great collection).

Payne's *The Descendants* ranks with *About Schmidt* in the very good category. This latest offering tells the story of Matt King (played by Clooney) whose wife is in coma as a result of a boating accident. King struggles to rebuild relationships with his two daughters and to deal with skeletons he didn't even know were in his closet. All of this is set against the backdrop of a candid look at the Hawaiian landscape, of which King and his cousins own a substantial piece that the family nearly all agrees they want to sell to a property developer.

The script of this film was heavy with expository dialogue. There is a lot of lag between moments that are truly moving but never inspiring. The film is well directed and well written with a cast that is very good, and they give performances that are... well... very good. In the end, like a student with great potential who is getting Bs, you want this film to rise from very good to exceptional. While it never gets there, it's still better than most other films in its class.